

## **English: As a Lingua Franca**

**Monica Singh and Tripti Sahu**

Director, Finishing School & Corporate Relations  
Head, Humanities,  
Scope College of Engineering Scope Campus,  
NH-12, Hoshangabad Road, Near Misrod, Bhopal, M.P., INDIA.  
Ph.D Research Scholar,  
Aisect University, Bhopal, M.P., INDIA.

(Received on: August 18, 2014)

### **ABSTRACT**

The situation of English as a *lingua franca* is ambivalent. It is a freely chosen international language and this has endowed it with some very positive features. English has become the international language of science and technology, commerce and diplomacy, tourism and travel. English is now the first source for neology in most languages. And since the world actually needs a *lingua franca*, English is certainly a good choice. Standard words are short and relatively easy to pronounce; there is very little morphology and since syntax is not too constraining, non-natives get by easily even with a low level of proficiency.

**Keywords:** Lingua franca, pronounce, syntax.

### **INTRODUCTION**

A lingua franca (or working language, bridge language, vehicular language, unifying language) is a language systematically used to make communication possible between people not sharing a mother tongue, in particular when it is a third language, distinct from both mother tongues. Lingua francas have arisen around

the globe throughout human history, sometimes for commercial reasons (so-called "trade languages") but also for diplomatic and administrative convenience, and as a means of exchanging information between scientists and other scholars of different nationalities. A lingua franca is a language systematically used to make communication possible between people not sharing a mother tongue, in particular when

it is a third language, distinct from both mother tongues. English has become a global lingua franca, a unique linguistic situation in world history. As there is no discernible coercion, it seems the world has freely chosen English. In past times the world has had other lingua francae; Greek, Swahili, French, Latin and so on and so forth.

### **POSITION OF ENGLISH AS THE GLOBAL LINGUA FRANCA**

English has established its position as the global lingua franca beyond any doubt; along with this status, it has become one of the symbols of our time, together with globalization, networking, economic integration, and the Internet. Like other zeitgeist symbols, it has been subject to much debate and has raised many fears. English has been seen as a threat to local languages and cultures, or alternatively, its global uses have been seen as a threat to Standard English. Such negative attitudes, even hostility, towards English are nevertheless comparatively recent and intertwined with the current wave of globalization, more complete than anything hitherto experienced and more closely associated with just one language. At the same time, English has been welcomed as a vehicle of efficiency in for example business and science, or as a new means of communication for globally emergent localities in a variety of non-mainstream subcultures.

The spread of English from the British Isles has taken place over a long period, starting from the early 17th century, and it has taken different forms in different parts of the world. In some cases new native

varieties developed, like those spoken in North America and Australia; they now enjoy the prestige of 'core varieties' or 'inner circle varieties' along with British English. In other cases, again, English was adopted as a second language in mainly Africa and Asia, and the resulting varieties are often spoken of as 'outer circle' varieties, 'New Englishes' or 'World Englishes'. The latter have not gained equal prestige to the 'core' varieties, but there has been fairly extensive descriptive research carried out on their specific as well as shared features. Kachru's work since the 1980s (e.g. Kachru 1982, 1985) has raised awareness of the issues relating to World Englishes, and important research has been done towards the description of these varieties, notably for instance brought together in Platt, Weber and Ho (1984) and Kortmann and Schneider (2004). In contrast to the native and the established second language varieties, the use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) has been hotly debated but relatively little studied. English as a language of communication between speakers for whom it is an additional language is assuming an increasingly vital role outside countries where English has an official status. The consequences of this to the development of English and our understanding of the language are surely worth attention in English Studies.

### **ENGLISH LANGUAGE THE LINGUA FRANCA OF INTERNATIONAL SCIENCE**

For practical reasons, the Pasteur Institute in Paris recently decided to publish its venerable *Annales de l'Institut Pasteur* in English. The new title is *Research in*

Virology (or Immunology or Micro biology, depending on the specialty). Institute officials explained that almost 100% of the articles submitted to the journal in 1987 were in English, compared to about 15% in 1973. The officials also noted that the journal's French title gave researchers the impression that it was not open to the international scientific community. As a result, papers were submitted here. In deference to Francophiles, the conversion to English is not absolute. French-language articles accepted by the journal will continue to be published in French Also; French abstracts will still accompany English-language articles.

However, this has not prevented the expected reaction—or overreaction—by the French media. *Le Monde* suggested that the change “sounds the death-knell for French-language science” (see *Nature*, vol. 338, April 6, 1989, p. 448). This is tame compared to the response to my 1976 article in *La Recherche*, which recommended that French scientists publish in English. (“Is French science too provincial?” Vol. 7, p. 757-60). Michael Debré, a former Prime Minister of France, claimed that my suggestion posed a threat “as serious as reduced birth rates, an impoverishment, from which people could not recover” and warned that “a nationalist revolt” could become, or rather will become, the natural attitude of young researchers if we follow Garfield” (*La Recherche*, vol. 7, 1976, p. 956).

Language clearly is a sensitive issue because it is so closely tied to national identity, heritage, and culture. But national pride should not blind scientists and journal editors to an obvious fact. Publishing

research papers in English is necessary to have the widest circulation and greatest impact in the international scientific community. This statement is supported by a number of studies based on the Institute for Scientific Information's Science Citation Index (SCi). One published analysis covered 1978 articles by French authors (*Current Contents*, no. 23, June 6, 1988, pp. 3-11).

The study showed that French researchers are greatly increasing their output of English-language articles. In 1978, the SCI indexed 17,300 papers by French authors. Of these, 51% were in English and 48% were in French. This is a major change over comparable *SCI* statistics for 1973, when only 25% of the 17,400 French-authored papers were in English and 75% were in French.

The study also demonstrated that French-authored articles in English were, on average, cited far more frequently than the French-language papers. The 1978 English-language papers received about 57,600 citations from 1978-1982, yielding a five-year impact rating—based on an *SCI* calculation—of 6.5 for the average paper. The French-language articles received 15,650, or a five-year impact of 1.9. These data on relative citation impacts applied to other non-English languages as well as French. The five-year impact of all 1978 *SCI* articles in English was 5.2, compared to 1.9 for German, 1.2 for Russian, and 0.7 for Japanese.

Linguistic purists from non-English-speaking countries may be right to insist on preserving their vernacular language as a point of national pride. But they should realize that their nation's prestige and visibility in the world of science may be

enhanced significantly by publishing in English. They should support, not condemn, researchers and journal editors who choose to publish in English and thereby advance their nations' scientific interests.

### **THE FUTURE OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS A GLOBAL LINGUA FRANCA**

There is little evidence to indicate that Mandarin Chinese is spreading around the world as a candidate for global lingua franca status as either a second or first language. In fact, the Chinese government has had its hands full with roping in all of the mutually unintelligible languages, or "dialects" as the one-China policy motivated government likes to call them, and their speakers into adopting Mandarin as a national lingua franca at the second language level. This has not stopped entities from journalists to professors to science fiction writers from making the claim, however, that Chinese is becoming the new global lingua franca. Not even the most ardent Chinese nationalists themselves or other of the most enthusiastic promoters of the idea that China is the next, obvious, and inevitable super power of the globalized world argue that Chinese is going to be a lingua franca of such a theoretical Chinese-dominated world of the future. There are many reasons, pointed out by level-headed linguistic realists, like John McWhorter and others, indicate that this is in fact not the likely scenario. Nearly all of Asia, with China leading the pack, is increasing their English mandatory and voluntary education at a clip that is even faster than the growth of their economies in recent years. People all over the world are giving up minority and

even widely-spoken first languages in favor of the "killer language" suspect number one, English.

Globalization is a onetime phenomenon (barring nuclear holocaust or some other catastrophic global tragedy that results in a reset to medieval times and a cessation of global connectivity). English is the language, for better or worse; fairly or unfairly; through pure incidence of circumstance perhaps, that is carrying us through this warp speed transition from unconnected world to globalized, connected, united world status. Internet, academic publication, road sign standards, public safety announcements, the global trade language, scientific standards and collaborative organizations, international language of air traffic control, and on and on—all English!

All scientific evidence points to such a conclusion, and we are obligated as language scientists to proffer hypotheses and theories about our linguistic futures that are based on data analysis and application of the scientific method. English is the communication tool, for the foreseeable future, of this new, emerging globalized world. We have been assured in the not too distant past of the near-future global dominance rise of Russia, then Japan, as well as the continued dominance of America. We are now assured by the popular media and pop-anthropologists of the day of the inevitability of the Chinese global super power. They may well be right or wrong in this most recent assertion. If that is the case, or if through twist of fate China stumbles as others did and Africa or some other struggling developer emerges as the new contender for replacement of American

economic hegemony, we need to heed what history has taught us about government or other powerful entities' attempts to assert control over natural language change—namely, it cannot be controlled, but instead is governed by natural forces. These forces, when studied objectively, indicate that the English infrastructure currently being put in place for global communication into the future will be the tool of any future super power—whether it be China, the EU, Africa, the United Nations, or even a new Latino ethnic majority United States of America. Any power that assumes the economic and military power mantle of this newly minted globalized world will use English as the language of government, to pass on their marching orders and profligate their “soft power,” whether it is their first or second language, by choice of planning or no. English (in whatever form it exists by that time) will be the coded language of this new shining or tarnished world of the future, and the new leaders will be forced to use this code to propel and churn this new mechanism effectively.

## CONCLUSION

ELF is to be viewed as a flexible mode of communication rather than as a fixed code. It is not defined as a set of formal features but as a flexible, dynamic resource: linguistic form is driven by functional purposes. With mutual intelligibility between the participants as the overall aim, considerations of correctness are overruled by notions of effectiveness. As a global communicative phenomenon, ELF cuts across the three circles of world English. It is 'non-territorial' in the sense that it could take place everywhere, in any constellation. It potentially integrates all speakers, also native speakers, of English who use it in an intercultural mode.

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